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ESSAY

Where Science and Religion Intersect: The Work of Ian Stevenson

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For most people, the word "fundamentalism" mainly evokes images of Islamic terrorists or Christian mega-churches and revivalist tents; but in the battle for people's hearts and minds, scientific fundamentalists have become equally as vocal and strident—and perhaps even more arrogant—in promoting their beliefs and assumptions about the nature of reality. As a result, the polarization between the two sides seems to be steadily deepening.

The well-known Templeton Prize—officially called the "Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities"—is described on its web site as an award meant to recognize and encourage those who, "particularly through scientific research, serve to supplement the wonderful ancient scriptures and traditions of all the world's religions." The goal, apparently, is to try to break down the traditional antagonism between science and religion, and many Templeton Prize winners have been scientists who have written about the implications of modern science for a spiritual understanding of the universe.

For several years, beginning in 2000, we nominated Ian Stevenson for the Templeton Prize, believing that no one exemplifies better than he what we understood to be one of the Templeton Foundation's primary purposes—to bring the empirical methods of science to bear on fundamental spiritual questions. Regrettably, he was never given the award. Nevertheless, we remain convinced that no one in modern times has done more than he to lead the way toward finding a scientifically defensible yet humanly meaningful middle path between the fundamentalisms that threaten to engulf us. In what follows we amplify this statement using a slightly modified version of what we sent to the Templeton Foundation in support of Ian's nomination.

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Since the beginnings of the scientific revolution over three centuries ago, the relationship between religion and science has been complicated, tumultuous, and often acrimonious. Although scientific and religious views managed to co-exist harmoniously well into the 19th century (as the examples of scientists such as Newton and Darwin show), the famous confrontation between Professor Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce in 1860 exemplified the modern trend, with religious-minded persons increasingly on the defensive and scientifically oriented persons on the offensive. In the last 150 years this gap has further widened, as the physical sciences have made unprecedented advances while religion has been forced to retreat even further from the position of itself offering definitive knowledge about the nature of the universe we live in. Here at the dawn of the 21st century, we see an alarming bifurcation in modern society, one that began in the West but has spread with science and technology into much of the rest of the world. On the one hand, the world view that now prevails among intellectual leaders and permeates all levels of society is that of a mechanistic and materialistic universe in which mind, consciousness, human personality, and the spiritual values by which many people try to live are, in the final analysis, merely byproducts of physical and biological processes. On the other hand, an increasing number of people clearly feel that this materialistic world view cannot account for a wide variety of important human experiences, and that it fails to satisfy their hunger for a sense of meaning and dignity in human life. Over the past several decades, proliferating New Age fads, the explosion of interest in alternative and complementary medical treatments, and the rapid growth of fundamentalist religious movements have all attested to a deepening dissatisfaction with the currently dominant materialistic world view. It has become increasingly obvious to some people, therefore, that our most urgent need is for systematic efforts to bridge the gap between scientific and religious views of the nature of the universe and especially to reconcile modern society's respect for empirical science with the widely felt sense that our lives somehow transcend the boundaries of our current spatiotemporal existence.

We are nominating Ian Stevenson for the Templeton Prize because we believe that his whole career exemplifies such an attempt, one which has systematically brought the powerful epistemological tools of science to bear on large questions about the origins, nature, and destiny of human personality. Since the beginning of his professional career in the 1940s, there have been two primary themes running throughout his research and publications. First, his encyclopedic knowledge of the history of science, religion, and ideas has instilled in him an acute awareness of the dangerous tendency shared by most of us, including scientists, to adopt fixed theoretical systems and thus to resist examining new ideas. As he put it: "We all tend to organize our experiences in various explanatory schemata which give us the impression (or illusion) of understanding the world around us. Any new idea impinges on the existing schemata and may by its simple strangeness arouse anxiety" (Stevenson, 1965: 55–56). One important theme in his thinking, therefore, has been that progress in any area of human thought

requires us to resist complacency and to incessantly question or probe deeper into all received views, systems, dogma, or authority. An implied corollary of this theme has been that progress in both science and religion requires us to recover "the wisdom that, as T. S. Eliot told us, we have lost in knowledge" (Stevenson, 1990: 2).

The second theme, fundamental to Dr. Stevenson's own research efforts, has been to examine, empirically and in depth, the nature of human personality. In opposition to the reductive views prevailing in modern science, medicine, psychology, and psychiatry—that human personality and mind are simply byproducts of the brain and body—he has consistently struggled, beginning with his work as a physician in the area of psychosomatic medicine, to fathom this vital but difficult subject in all of its complexities. Beginning in the earliest years of his career, for example, he published numerous papers arguing—and demonstrating—that disease and healing involve the whole person and not just the breakdown or the treatment of separate parts (see, e.g., Stevenson, 1948, 1949; for later statements, see Stevenson, 1984a, 1985) and that individual differences and character derive from more than just genetic makeup and the influences of early childhood environment (e.g., Stevenson, 1977; see also Stevenson, 2000). In these respects, it has since become evident that he was far ahead of his time.

Because of the volume and quantity of this early work, he was already a distinguished scientist, professor, and head of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia when in 1967 he was appointed to a chair at the University endowed by Chester Carlson (inventor of the Xerox process) specifically to enable him to conduct full-time empirical research on the even more contentious subject of the possibility of human survival of bodily death. All the major religions view human personality as something that transcends the biological organism, and as William James emphasized in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1958), this view is rooted not in the dogmas and systems of religion but in individual human experience. Nevertheless, as science and religion have diverged over the past 150 years, there has been remarkably little effort to apply the methods of science to questions and experiences that religion has long attempted to address, and "knowledge" and "faith" have increasingly been seen as entirely separate domains. Dr. Stevenson is in fact one of the extremely few individuals in the past century who have attempted to bridge this gap between scientific methods and knowledge and religious experience and faith by directly examining and strengthening the many and varied kinds of empirical evidence we actually have for the survival of human personality after death. By far the largest proportion of his subsequent scientific output revolves around this central topic, which obviously carries him far outside the reductionist mainstream of contemporary science. As a result, he has so far suffered undeserved neglect and even a certain amount of ridicule from people who ought to know better. But we assert categorically—and his publications abundantly demonstrate—that his work involves real science and deserves to be more widely known and studied.

The centerpiece of Dr. Stevenson's many scientific contributions to this area consists of a sustained, determined, and disciplined effort to locate and study "cases of the reincarnation type." The sheer volume of this entirely original work, most of which had to be carried out under very difficult and sometimes even physically dangerous conditions, is simply staggering. Even so staunch a critic of the paranormal as Carl Sagan expressed admiration for this body of work (Sagan, 1996: 302). Dr. Stevenson's *magnum opus* along these lines, *Reincarnation and Biology,* which he published in 1997 at the age of almost 80, is a two-volume, 2268-page work that should be of particular interest to biomedical scientists since it concentrates on cases in which the children display birthmarks or birth defects, often of extremely unusual form, that correspond to wounds or injuries that killed the person whose life the child claims to remember. Over 200 such cases, investigated by Dr. Stevenson, are reported in these volumes in meticulous detail (Stevenson, 1997a; see also its synopsis, Stevenson, 1997b).

Although Dr. Stevenson originated and is probably best known for the work just described, he has sought throughout his career to identify and pursue any and all kinds of empirical data that could shed new light on the survival question. Thus he has made unique and important new observations on topics as diverse as near-death experiences, deathbed visions, apparitional phenomena, telepathic impressions, poltergeist cases, and trance mediumship. He is also alone in having carried out and published intensive studies of so-called "xenoglossy" cases, cases in which the subject appears capable of fluent and productive use of a language that he or she did not learn normally. The best such case, published in *Unlearned Language* (Stevenson, 1984b), involved a secondary personality in a young Indian woman; this personality spoke and wrote fluently an archaic form of Bengali appropriate to the life she claimed to have led some 150 or so years earlier, and she also provided certain factual details which Dr. Stevenson was subsequently able to verify, but only by means of an extremely laborious investigation of obscure historical records.

Clearly this brief account can serve only to sketch the overall direction and character of Dr. Stevenson's scientific contributions. But what does it all mean and how does it relate to the Templeton Prize? At the very least this work adds important new information to an already large body of experimental and field studies which collectively establish beyond any reasonable doubt the existence of "paranormal" human capacities that in principle cannot be reconciled with any of the currently orthodox physicalist/reductionist theories of the mind-brain relation. A scientific world view in which these pernicious doctrines have been decisively overthrown is already much more friendly to spiritual matters, so that even on these narrow grounds Dr. Stevenson's work would merit the Templeton Foundation's recognition and support.

Even more importantly, in our opinion, he has significantly enriched and strengthened the already substantial empirical evidence *directly* supporting the possibility that some aspect of human personality does in fact survive bodily

death. This possibility, as we said earlier, lies near the core of virtually all of the world's great religious traditions, and its scientific investigation by all available means formed the central purpose of the extraordinarily distinguished group of people who founded the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in England in 1882. We believe that future generations will come to see Ian Stevenson as one of the great scientific pioneers of our age, following in the direct line from that group and coming on down to the present through such eminent American counterparts as William James and Gardner Murphy. Dr. Stevenson's efforts can in fact be viewed appropriately as delivering one major installment on a research program explicitly proposed by James, initially in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1958) and even more clearly a few years later, near the end of his own extraordinary life, in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909/1971), his last completed work. As James himself put it: "Let empiricism once become associated with religion, as hitherto, through some strange misunderstanding, it has become associated with irreligion, and I believe that a new era of religion as well as philosophy will be ready to begin" (p. 270). Or, as James's colleague and friend F. W. H. Myers put it: "Religion, in its most permanent sense, is the adjustment of our emotions to the structure of the universe; and what we now most need is to discover what that structure is" (Myers, 1893/1961: 46).

Ian Stevenson's entire career exemplifies that spirit and testifies to its fruitfulness. His efforts seem especially important in this age when the traditional belief in survival after death—and more broadly the belief in human personality as something transcending the physical organism—seems to have been badly eroded by the advance of scientific materialism. Most educated persons today—including highly educated religious persons—erroneously believe that such traditional concepts have little or no empirical support, and, perhaps for this reason, many of the more liberal or educated religious leaders have downplayed or even discarded the concept of survival as central to a religious view of the universe, emphasizing instead the social and moral importance of a religious life and perspective. Without some concept that human life transcends this finite material existence, however, the foundations of religion as a spiritual and moral force are gravely and unnecessarily weakened. Scientific research such as Dr. Stevenson's, which specifically addresses deep questions about the nature and postmortem destiny of human personality, can and should have a powerful impact on the religious beliefs and spiritual well-being of many people, particularly if the research becomes more widely known. Although not lending itself to affiliation with any *particular* religion, his work is rooted in the firm conviction that there is no irreconcilable antipathy between science and religion and that open-minded empirical inquiry is leading us inexorably to an expanded conception of the nature of human personality, one which is compatible with many aspects of traditional religious beliefs. Similar views, including an explicit endorsement of the importance of survival research, were expressed by the distinguished British biologist and former Templeton Prize winner Sir Alister Hardy in his book *The Divine Flame* (1966).

Like others who have attempted to apply the methods of science to traditionally religious questions, Dr. Stevenson has encountered much misunderstanding, resistance, and even hostility, both from scientists and from religious persons who, from their very different perspectives, too often assume that all such questions have already been answered. Although a few other psychiatrists, psychologists, and anthropologists—most of them inspired by Dr. Stevenson—are attempting to carry on research on the question of survival in the same spirit of methodological rigor and intellectual honesty, efforts such as his to strengthen both religion and science by bringing them to bear on each other have a lamentably precarious existence in today's society. There is a circular relationship between the low levels of funding currently available for such research, the unwillingness of most mainstream journals to publish it, the widespread lack of understanding of its purposes and methods, and near-universal ignorance about the scope, depth, and quality of the data already available. Recognition of Dr. Stevenson's extraordinary accomplishments by the Templeton Foundation would help immensely in promoting more widespread awareness of the religious, scientific, and human implications of this work. Dr. Stevenson's humility notwithstanding, we hope that you will agree with the views expressed here and that you will find it appropriate and timely to honor him with the recognition he so richly deserves.

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With this statement, we hoped to inform the panel of judges for the Templeton Prize about the nature and importance not just of Ian's work, but, by extension, that of psychical research in general. But we fear that this attempt fell on deaf ears at the Templeton Foundation, just as attempts to educate the larger scientific community and general public about the goals and methods of psychical research have similarly so far failed. Those goals and methods were described succinctly over a century ago by Myers: "The method which our race has found most effective in acquiring knowledge is ... the method of modern Science. ... This method has never yet been applied to the all-important problem of the existence, the powers, the destiny of the human soul" (Myers, 1903, vol. 1: 1).

Ian, we repeat, exemplified to a degree unparalleled in modern times this thorough-going empiricism in relation to matters of religion. As the most visible organization today ostensibly promoting the reconciliation of science and religion, the Templeton Foundation ought to have honored him, because he, like his distinguished SPR predecessors, pursued psychical research out of a conviction that the gap between spiritual faith and scientific knowledge would only widen without empirical support for the fundamental idea that human personality somehow transcends the physical organism. Ian's was not the currently popular "thin" path of reconciliation between science and religion, which seeks common ground in recondite "anthropic principles" and the like, while scarcely mentioning fundamental elements of traditional belief, such as the existence within us of something like a soul, something capable of surviving

bodily death. This strategy may avoid or at least minimize overt conflict with present-day mainstream materialist science, but it does so at the cost of marginalizing and trivializing the world's great wisdom traditions. Ian's work, in stark contrast, goes straight at controversial subjects lying at the heart of all religions, and our human hearts as well, and in a manner that shows all the tenacity, discipline, rigor, and open-mindedness that is characteristic of the highest scientific achievements.

Ian himself did not say much about the spiritual implications of his work (one exception is Stevenson, 1969, especially pp. 27–33). He rarely wrote in this vein because he believed strongly that the primary role of the scientist is to provide evidence relevant to the question, while it remains the duty of each individual person to examine that evidence and draw his or her own conclusions. Ian frequently noted that when people asked him about his beliefs,

> I decline to answer this question because my beliefs should make no difference to anyone asking such a question. As Leonardo da Vinci said, "Whoever in discussion adduces authority uses not intellect but rather memory." Everyone should examine the evidence and judge it for himself. (Stevenson, 1990: 21)

Furthermore, as a scientist in a society in which it is "subversive" for a scientist to talk about a soul that may survive death (Stevenson, 1990: 22),[1] Ian held firmly to the belief that his first and most important task was neither to preach nor to speculate, but rather to amass empirical data that can undermine the assumptions that currently make such talk subversive. The evidence that Ian collected, investigated, and presented as suggestive of survival after death speaks volumes for the religious and spiritual implications, without his having to spell these out explicitly. If his work is not a prime example of science working effectively in service of the truly fundamental interests of religion—and strengthening both science and religion in the process—then we don't know what else is or could be. Even though he has gone, and will now never be recognized with a Templeton Prize, we remain hopeful that the larger view of what he tried to do—and did—will become evident to future generations.

Note

[1] Nevertheless, Ian was never shy about engaging in subversive talk. Early in his career he cautioned that "I do not believe science has heard the last of the mind or the soul" (1954: 34).

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